TEXT AND MATTER

NEW CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE *PEARL*-POET

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GAWAIN'S SHIELD AS *SIGNUM* [1]

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The maker of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* [2] is a genial host: as even a cursory glance at the secondary literature on the poem reveals, he permits his guests to wander where they choose, without imposing directions on them. What is more, if we ask for clarification, he gives it, freely and abundantly. If we want to know about his pentangle, for example, he tells us what it is, what it means, and how it received that meaning. The difficulty is that he is too open-handed. He tells us not only that it is a "pentangel" (620, 623, 636, 664) but also that it is an "endeles knot" (630); as if that were not sufficient, he adds that it is a "gomen" (661). It betokens "trawþ" (626); that seems clear, but the dictionaries suggest rather more possible meanings than we would like for this short word. He tells us that Solomon "set" (625) it, but even this action becomes less than permanent because he also suggests that we be concerned about its use in a particular case ("quy þe pentangel apendez, 623). Further, although we would like to see it as a single sign with a single meaning, he insists on attaching referents to all its component parts, and we are confronted by the infamous five fives.

What the poet does not tell us is what he means by "meaning," or rather, what he means when he talks about the things we call "meaning." For that, we must look elsewhere. Generations of readers have turned to their own commonsense notions or to various formal theories, but very little has yet been done with the theory of signs current in the poet's own age. Dozens of tracts survive from the period which set forth the details of a powerful theory of meaning, one which dealt with problems of pure signification, meaning in propositional context, and even meaning in social context, but even though their ideas were all but universal in the fourteenth century, they have been only rarely mentioned in connection with the literature of the period and have never been fully applied.[3]

Medieval logicians recognized the arbitrary nature of signification by making a distinction between those signs which convey information to an audience naturally, such as the barking of dogs and the groans of the sick, and those which signify because of the consensus of a community, such as the words in human language. These latter signs, which signify *ad placitum*, are often said to have been imposed by a first institutor. If the word "dog" signified the barking animal naturally, then all people at all times would use the same word, but as it is, the consensus of various national groups has created "canis," "chien," "dog," "hund" and the like. This first institutor is rarely

known by name when we are dealing with ordinary words, but more elaborate signs are often connected with stories of their imposition which preserve the name of their creator. This is especially the case when there is a reason behind his choice. Signs are arbitrary, but this does not mean that they are random. As Lambert of Auxerre says, the *voluntas* of the first institutor may act in accordance with right reason, so that there is a meaningful connection between a sign and its referent. The most widely known example is the Latin word for man, "homo," which was chosen for its resemblance to the word "humus," which means the earth from which the first man was created and to which our bodies will ultimately return. This is not a natural connection (or there would be no words "man," "anthropos" or "vir") but it is nonetheless a connection which teaches or reminds us of a natural truth.

Solomon is the first institutor of the pentangle as a sign. He did his work well, for, as we shall see, it teaches us much about its referent. The device itself has two names, each of which is connected with a different important property that it has. It is called a "pentangle" because of its five-fold nature; this would be understood by anyone who had paid attention in mathematics class or at Pentecost sermons. It is called an "endless knot" because it is a unified infinite figure, despite its composite nature. Even when considering it as a combination of elements, the reader is moved toward the idea of unified endlessness by the choice of the number. This a so-called circular number, for its square, cube and so on always end with the digit 5.[4] The pentangle itself is also endless in a geometrical sense, for new, smaller pentangles may be inscribed in the center pentagon of every pentangle, and the ratios of the line segments of the pentangle produce the ratio of the length and breadth of the self-replicating golden rectangle.

So far, so good. But there is a problem with the word "endless" since it could mean either spatial or temporal endlessness. A further problem is that the pentangle as an object is not really endless in either sense, for the shield on which it is painted could be destroyed and the figure itself is surely limited in area even if the line which contains it has no starting or stopping point. Why then the poet's insistence on endlessness?

The *significatio* of the pentangle is *trawþ*, not the word "trawþ," but *trawþ* itself. That is, when it is free from any propositional context, the pentangle causes the idea of trawþ to come into the mind of a beholder who knows the sign. In this connection, "trawþ" means "truth," for in the fourteenth century this word was replacing "sooth" in the senses of *OED truth*, "that which is true, real, or actual (in a general or abstract sense); reality; spec. in religious use, spiritual reality as the subject of revelation or object of faith." It is used as the English equivalent of

Latin *veritas* in such theologically charged passages as John 14:6, "I am weye truthe and liif," and John 8:32, "the truthe shal make ȝou fre,"[5] and contemporary vernacular works frequently refer to God as "souereyn trewþe"[6] or say that "God is trowthe, and all trowthe commeþ of hym."[7]

The pentangle, then, in the realm of pure signification, is a sign for absolute truth, *summa veritas*, which is both spatially infinite and temporally eternal, which is, in fact, God. In offering us such a sign, the *Gawain*-Poet is operating in the tradition which presents Hermes Trismegistus as the institutor of the infinite sphere with its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere as a sign for God,[8] or the shield which has the word "God" inscribed in its center and "Father," "Son" and "Holy Spirit" in its corners, linked to "God" by lines inscribed with the word "is" and to each other by the words "is not," as a sign for the Trinity. By placing such a device on Gawain's shield, the poet is not claiming that Gawain is God, any more that the cross on a crusader's shield means that he is the cross. Rather, it is a statement that Gawain believes in and relies on God as Infinite Truth.

Such an assertion seems immediately to contradict the experience of every modern reader of the poem. We all know that the pentangle means something about Gawain, and we can quickly point to lines 623 and 631ff. as proof. Yet there is no contradiction here, for the pentangle is capable of multiple meanings, as is the word "trawþ." In addition to being the equivalent for *veritas*, "trawþ" is also used where Latin texts use *fides*, and so also means "faith." Langland frequently uses the word in both senses, and the Middle English version of *St. Edmund's Mirror*[9] says that "trouthe es na noþer thyng bot trowyng of thyng þat may noghte be sene." This *fides*, however, is "shaped" exactly like *veritas*, for the soul in grace is once again in the image of God, with mind composed of properly interconnected reason, memory and will just as God is composed of the three Persons of the Trinity. With these words substituted for the words referring to God in three persons, the Shield of Truth becomes the Shield of the Soul.[10] The faith of the soul in grace is therefore appropriately symbolized by the pentangle, for, as Augustine reminds us,[11] our faith will become truth when we are given eternal life.

Absolute *trawþ* is both infinite and eternal, but human *trawþ* has a temporal beginning when the soul is created and is lost when the soul sins, only to be recreated again and again through the gift of grace in sacrament. The poet's pentangle, which is both composite and unified, which refers both to the eternal truth of God and to the mutable faith of humans (for even endless knots may be untied), is an appropriate image for a meditation on the most basic relationships between God and man. It is therefore an acceptable device not only for Gawain

but for any Christian in a state of grace, that is, for anyone who has been perfected, however momentarily, by God.

Far from leading to confusion, then, the application of the theory of signification current in the poet's age to the excess of meaning in his description of the pentangle results in a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of his views. His knowledge of this theory allows him both to allow multiple meanings and multiple audience responses to come into being and to control such ideas within a theologically orthodox framework, and the potential for linguistic ambiguity is made to serve more unified ends. Our discovery of this method allows us to appreciate his curious use of the word "gomen" (661) as yet another name for the pentangle.

The medieval logicians were quite sensitive to the fact that the effect of a word in a proposition depends upon more than its *significatio*. In the first place, equivocal words (such as *trawþ*) may signify more than one thing. Yet even this does not exhaust the possibilities, for in certain propositional contexts words take on the added property of *suppositio*; they "stand for" referents quite different from their original signification, even though the rationale for their extension is quite clear. In "I am reading Cicero," the word "Cicero" stands for the man's books, but in "Cicero was a Roman consul," it stands for the man. When the pentangle shield is the Shield of the Trinity, it equates God and Truth, but when it is carried by Gawain, it means "Gawain is now faithful." The logical treatises, which have as their purpose the instruction of young men in the techniques of preventing ambiguity, are filled with examples of syllogisms which appear to be formally valid but are in fact fallacious because of their sloppy treatment of *equivocatio* and *suppositio* :

> quicquid currit, habet pedes
> Secana currit
> ergo Secana habet pedes.
>
> Whatever runs, has feet.
> The Seine runs.
> Therefore the Seine has feet.[12]
>
> canis est animal
> et celeste sidus est canis
> ergo celeste sidus est animal
>
> A dog is an animal.
> And a heavenly star is "the Dog."
> Therefore a constellation is an animal.[13]

In his use of the word "gomen" at line 661, the *Gawain*-Poet shows us his ability to use a word with multiple meanings in a context which allows many of its possible meanings to co-exist, without creating the

sort of verbal strife which would force us to choose one from the set. If we hear it and think of *MED* 1a, "Joy, happiness; pleasure, delight, gaiety, mirth," then the fact that it is endless may move us to think of the eternal bliss which is promised to the elect, and which is called "endles gamen" in a contemporary sermon.[14] Such joy may quickly be contrasted with Gawain's own state of mind as he sets out on his journey, "þaȝ hym no gomen þoȝt" (692). In another vein, if "gomen" makes us think of a game played according to rules and with fixed time limits, such as the game requested by the Green Knight ("gomen," 274, "game," 365, and "gomnes," 683) then the endlessness of spiritual bliss contrasts most poignantly with Gawain's own predicament as he sets forth, for he could foresee a most unhappy end to this game. The word *gomen* is also used to mean both the action of hunting (1894) and the object of the hunt (1635); both of these meanings appear in John Mirk's sermon on First Corinthians 9:24-6, which describes the duty of every Christian to strive for eternal life:

> To þis labour Seyunt Paule, yn hys pystyll of þis day, techeþe and saythe þus: "Sic currite, ut comprehendatys." "Rennyth soo þat ȝe may gripe þe gome." By þis gomen and rennynge ȝe schull undyrstond bysy labour. For he þat rennyþe for þe gamen, he enforsuþe hym yn all his myght to ren swyftly. So most yche good seruand enforse hym forto laboure yn þe degree þat God hath sette hym yn.[15]

Whichever of these interpretive paths we follow, then, the result is that we come face to face with Gawain's predicament, which is the predicament of all living humans. Our earthly lives have fixed beginnings and ends, but they should have as their goal the attainment of endless eternal joy. This is a state which may be known in advance, however fleetingly, only through grace, at those moments when our souls are in the image of God. At such times our faith is shaped like truth, but even this similarity may be shattered by a sinful act or thought.

The overabundance of meaning we find in the description of the pentangle and, for that matter, throughout the poem, is not, therefore, an indication that the poet is giving his audience carte blanche: his words allow (what words do not?) a multiplicity of interpretations, but they anticipate and even request a particular sort of structuring collaboration by the audience. The poet expected readers who would perceive the ambiguities not as evidence of confusion or indeterminacy but as a challenge to create for themselves a new example of the hierarchical pattern explicitly and much less interestingly expressed in so many other medieval texts; while there is nothing which requires us to *be* such readers, even the mere fact that a fourteenth-century poet could imagine such an audience is a fact worthy of future study.

Notes

1. The material in this essay is discussed more fully and in fuller context in my *Medieval Sign Theory and* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

2. Ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon: 2nd ed., rev. N. Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

3. The ideas discussed here are most readily found in Peter of Spain, *Tractatus*, called afterwards *Summule Logicales*, ed. L. M. de Rijk (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1972); Lambert of Auxerre, Logica (*Summa Lamberti*), ed. Franco Alessio (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1971); William of Sherwood, *Introduction to Logic*, trans. N. Kretzman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), and L. M. de Rijk, *Logica modernorum: A Contribution to the History of Early Terminist Logic* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1962). Despite variations in detail, these works often present identically-phrased definitions and use identical examples, and their basic ideas were known to anyone with even the rudiments of a university education. Peter of Spain's tracts survive in hundreds of manuscripts, and Jean Gerson reports in *De examinatione doctrinarum* [*Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Desclèe, 1973), p.475] that schoolboys memorized them while still too young to understand their contents.

4. Boethius, *De arithmetica*, *PL* 63, col. 1137b: "Atque hoc usque in infinitum semper evenit."

5. *The English Hexapala* (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1841).

6. *Dives and Pauper*, ed. P. H. Barnum, EETS 275, pp. 154, 232, 234.

7. *Middle English Sermons from MS. Roy. 8B xxiii*, ed. W. O. Ross, EETS os 117, p. 45.

8. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De Genuinis rerum coelestium, terrestrium, et inferarum proprietatibus*, ed. G. Pontanus (Frankfurt, 1601; rpt. Frankfurt: Minerva, 1964), p. 12.

9. In *Religious Pieces in Prose and Verse*, ed. G. G. Perry, EETS os 26, p. 38.

10. See Julian Franklyn, *Shield and Crest: An Account of the Art and Science of Heraldry*, (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1967), p. 459; *Rolls of Arms: Henry III; The Matthew Paris Shields, c.1244-1259*, ed. T. D. Tremlett (London: University Press, 1967), p. 61; Ottfried Neubecker, *Heraldry: Sources, Symbols and Meaning* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 222; and Rodney Dennys, *The Heraldic Imagination* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1975), p. 48.

11. Augustine, *De trinitate*, CCSL 50, IV, xviii (24).

13. De Rijk, *Logica Modernorum*, p. 121.

14. *English Metrical Homilies from Manuscripts of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. John Small (Edinburgh: William Patterson, 1862), p. 20.

15. John Mirk, *Mirk's Festival*, ed. T. Erbe, EETS es 96, p. 65. This use of "gomen" to mean both the process and the goal is not unique. See also *Select English Works of John Wyclif*, Vol. 2, ed. Thomas Arnold (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1871), pp. 257-58.